

Home Will Be... by twowritehands

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Summary:

Joyce has to protect her children from nightmares in any way she can. None of them feel safe in the house. Jim has an idea.

Home Will Be...

The house felt too quiet and *strange* now. Two weeks ago it had been just a house. Now not even a wall was just a wall. Joyce had Will back but the nightmare wasn't over. The kids said the thing was dead, but it still felt wrong to turn her back on that wall, or to take down the lights. There had to be *more* out there and what stopped them from coming? Nothing.

Will had spent a week in the hospital, during which the landlord repaired the hole in the wall and the burnt hallway with the kind of silent acceptance that Joyce had momentarily lost her mind, and understandably too. She offered to pay for it and was told to worry about Will's doctor bills instead.

When they got him home, Joyce put all her efforts into helping Will get stronger, and getting everything back to normal. It took a lot of work. Will still had a bad cough and night terrors. Meanwhile, Jonathan insisted he slept fine but wasn't sleeping at all.

For three days, they all put on happy faces and didn't talk about the terror. Secretly, Joyce had her own share of nightmares and anxiety attacks but kept absolutely silent on both matters; her boys needed a strong, brave mother to show them that everything was okay again.

When the act became too much, she crept to the kitchen one snowy night and dialed Hopper's home number. He answered after only the second ring, wide awake despite the late hour. "Hea-lo?"

"Hop? It's Joyce."

His bored tone focused into one of alert concern. "Joyce? 'smatter?"

She gripped the phone, struggling to breathe. Every shadow seemed to move. Finally she choked, "C-come over?"

"Sit tight. Ten minutes." He hung up. She sat the handset gently in the cradle and clutched her chest. Tears ran down her face and she covered her mouth as she rocked. The shadows were oozing--she had to check on the boys--

Her socked feet flew over the new carpet silently as she flitted from one bedroom door to the next. She could see them both: Will sound asleep, Jonathan reclined on top of his covers with his arms crossed and eyes shut tightly, headphones blaring slightly. But his toe wasn't tapping; he wasn't in the music.

Joyce wanted to go to him, but if he saw her in this state it would only increase his worry. She darted back into her room, dried her eyes and tried to breathe normally. When headlights swept the front of the house, she wrenched open her window and leaned half out of it to call around the side of the house.

"Hop!" she said, just loud enough to draw his attention through the snowy night air. He stopped with one foot on the porch, reached instinctively for his gun, and looked around. When he spotted her in the window he moved to her slowly. "Joyce--where are the boys?"

"Asleep--well, Jonathan's faking it."

The light from her room spilled over his confused face as he leaned on her windowsill. He was out of uniform, but had come armed, "Okay...."

She put a shaky hand to her neck and rubbed at the tension. "Hop--I can't do this! I--I can't act like nothing bad happened! Will *died* . My baby was *dead* in that place! How? How do we just move on?"

His hands closed on hers tightly. "You got him back, Joyce," he said firmly.

"Yeah but monsters are *really out there* and they're--they're *in the house* and how do I keep my kids safe, Hop? Huh? How?"

"Sssh, ssh, ssh," he pulled her half out of the window into a hug. "It's okay. It's okay."

She cried into his shoulder, still swallowing the sounds as much as she could in case either of the boys were up now. He stroked her hair, whispered soothing sounds, and traced her spine, circling each lung with the wide palm of his hand as if he meant to just iron out her crinkled lungs for her. "Breathe, honey. It's okay."

She hiccuped; the senseless term of endearment surprised her but it brought an unforeseen wave of relief with it. Maybe she wasn't so alone. Perhaps sensing her sudden self consciousness, he pulled back a little. Their eyes met.

She sniffed, dabbed at her nose, unsure of herself. His hand closed around hers, warming it against the cold of the night at his back. She knew without a doubt she would have lost Will if not for Hop's help, but he did so much more than his job. He never stopped being there even after Will was back safe.

He had visited Will every single day of the week that the boy was in the hospital --even though, Joyce *knew* that hospitals were the last place Jim Hopper ever wanted to be.

He'd come around to bring Will the Christmas presents from everyone around town. Other times, he had smuggled in junk food and candy that the nurses didn't approve of. Joyce had overheard when Hop had recounted for Will, with no embellishments but plenty of praise, the way she had never given up on him. Not *ever*. She had watched as he and Will worked out this cheesy handshake.

And now--a call in the middle of the night and here he was. It was like she had gained a permanent protector. She didn't know how else to thank him but to kiss him. So she did.

He breathed hard through his nose, returning the kiss tenfold, wrapping her back up in his arms and half dragging her from the window again. Only her knees down remained in the house. She accidentally kicked the frame. Will's bedroom light came on. "MOM!?!?"

Joyce broke away, wrenching herself back through the window. "I'm coming, Will!"

Jonathan met her in the hallway. They went to Will's bedside together. The boy was white as a sheet and on the verge of his own panic attack. As he coughed, she kissed his forehead to gage his temperature. His sweat was as cold as ice. Hopper knocked on the front door.

All three of them jumped and Joyce grabbed her heart. "Shit, that scared me!"

"Who is it?" Jonathan asked, glancing at Will's clock.

"I-I called Hopper. Hang on, sweetie."

She left Jonathan soothing Will and hurried to remove all the deadbolts on the door. The chief only stepped through, hand falling naturally to the small of her back, before both Jonathan and Will came to investigate.

"What's going on?" Will demanded, still short of breath.

Jonathan's dark rimmed eyes showed the whites. "Mom, what happened? Did it come back?"

Will clung to his brother who clung right back. Joyce went onto her toes. "NO!"

"Then why did you call the cops?"

"I-- didn't--I--just--I--Hop is here as a friend."

Comprehension dawned sooner on the sixteen year old. Jonathan's jaw dropped and he almost smirked. "Really?"

"*Not like that* , Jonathan!" Joyce insisted. Hop held up a hand.

"Yeah. Geez, kid. You're mother is concerned about the house. Thinks it might feel unsafe for you guys, considering."

They couldn't even deny it with the way the two boys stood clinging to one another in the dark shadows, afraid of the very walls and the ceiling. Hopper smacked his lips, nodding to himself. "Okay, yeah. Everybody get in the truck."

"What? Why? Where are we going?" They each asked.

"My house. I have room for ya, if you don't mind sharing. Just for the night so you can *rest* . The three of you look like zombies, I'm telling you it's not healthy. Truck. Now."

“Hop--”

“This house is filled with too many bad memories. Come on. Get your toothbrushes and your backpacks and whatever else you'll need tomorrow. All of you. Joyce, just do it.”

The boys liked this idea. Especially Will who considered the chief his hero, and rightfully too. Jonathan relented like all teenage boys denying that they are afraid always do; a casual shrug, a mumbled *whatever*. Joyce sighed and actually smiled with a tad bit of relief. Hopper scooped up the dog and brought him, too.

It began to snow during the drive across town. Will had instantly insisted on music and the only thing any station would play was Christmas carols. The four of them and the dog rode in a grim kind of silence which made the merry tunes kind of mocking.

Merry, Merry, Merry, Merry Christmas!

(Merry, Merry, Merry, Merry Christmas!)

On, on they send

On without end

Their joyful tone

To every home

When they pulled into Hopper's driveway, the light of his small porch illuminated a snowy yard and snow steeped front stoop. As they entered the small living room/dining room, they knocked ice from their shoes and shook flakes from their hair and shoulders.

The open kitchen looked cluttered with food items and stacked dishes. The couch looked slept on. The TV was still playing, and its presence put a delighted smile on Will's face. The dog rushed to every corner sniffing wildly, panting with joy.

“I have a remote for the TV and the new couch pulls out into a bed. Boys, you should be comfortable.”

Joyce helped them pull it out while Hop disappeared to the back of the trailer and returned with blankets and pillows. After turning

through the channels until they found something other than the news to watch, Jonathan buried Will with the blankets and pillows, and stretched out next to his little brother, finding that they took up most of the room.

“Where’s mom gonna sleep?” he asked with suspicion. Remembering the feel of his beard against her lips and the taste of his mouth--he’d just had a cigarette--Joyce blushed an even, dark red. Hopper said, “My room. I’ll sleep in the truck.”

“ *What?* ” all three objected. Joyce shook her head. “No, Hop. That’s crazy.”

“It’s roomy. I’m fine.”

“You’ll freeze!” Joyce asserted.

Jonathan and Will traded a look and then Jonathan traded one with Joyce who felt her blush spread down her chest. She sighed with frustration and dragged Hop down the hall. “Just--shut up--we can share. It’s no big deal. I’ll be *under* the covers, you’ll be *over* the covers. Head to tails, like cousins.” she pitched her voice specifically for the kids.

Jonathan snickered and the adults did their best to ignore him. She swung the door closed but then caught it and pushed it wide open. They giggled some more. Joyce remained tomato red.

Hop’s bedroom was tiny. The queen sized bed left just enough room for tiny end tables and a footpath at the foot of the bed. An outside door led to the deck. The closet door couldn’t be closed for the stack of boxes sticking out. They looked rummaged through regularly except for one. The flaps were folded closed, *Sara* written on the side, a bit of pink tulle poking from a damaged corner.

As cramped and disorderly as the whole place was, it felt clean and safe. None of the shadows tried to ooze when she wasn’t looking. Down the hall, she could hear Will talking as the TV channels changed rhythmically avoiding news and weather and the shopping networks.

Hop obviously never slept in here because the bed wasn't made. It didn't even have sheets. They dressed the bed together, and he reclined on his side, fluffed up the pillows, and then folded her side of the quilt down. "Over, under."

She burrowed into the clean, cold sheets. He got up, hit the light, and carefully reclined again.

"Will you need an alarm for work?" He asked.

"No, it's my day off. Just have to get Will to school. Jonathan, too, I guess since he doesn't have a car here."

"It's a little early to go back to school isn't it?"

"He's dying to, and the doctors said he could."

They fell silent. Joyce stared up at the ceiling, trying not to feel so self conscious as she remembered the kiss at her bedroom window barely an hour ago. She was thankful when Hop didn't bring it up.

Light from the TV actually felt normal and comforting, even though it flickered, because it was supposed to flicker and the sounds of late night television and her sons laughing, and a man breathing evenly beside her....just....washed over her like a balm. Her eyelids dropped like anvils.

The next thing she knew, daylight. Dogs, and *a TV* ? Oh yeah. The moment she really opened her eyes she recalled relocating her family to the Chief's lakeside trailer around 2:00 am last night. All because of her own sweeping panic attack and sudden acute fear of the dark.

"Oh god," she moaned into the pillow.

"Call me Jim," he said. Joyce jumped and looked over her shoulder. Hop was in the bed, over the covers, a pillow anchored over his face by the crook of his arm against his eyes. The words were muffled for it.

She laughed. "What time is it?"

"I took the guys to school forty minutes ago."

“What?” she sat bolt upright.

He snorted lightly, waking from the light trance. “Geez.”

“I slept that long? Why didn't you wake me up?”

“Because you needed the sleep, Joyce. Jon agreed with me.”

“If you two start ganging up on me, I quit.”

He chuckled. “He’s a good kid. Just looking out for ya.”

“He’s the kid. I'm the mom. It shouldn't be the other way around--”

As she spoke, Hop shifted and his hand lighted briefly on her waist. It caused her voice to catch ever so slightly, so he withdrew it. She turned over to face him and put her hand on his arm. “Jim....”

Their eyes met, and she was stunned by his intense blue gaze. For so long now, his eyes had been faded with shadows. They seemed now as clear as blown blue glass, locked on her with a soft set in his massive brow.

She turned her thumb in small circles against his arm. The movement made the corner of his mouth twitch up and a spark ignited in his eyes.

There was no sound but for their breathing. The quiet noise of air dragging in his sharp nose, swirling into his big lungs, and rushing out again had lulled her to sleep, and she rather liked the strong and steady rhythm of it. Laying there beside him, looking in his eyes and hearing his breathing was the single most intimate thing to have happened to her in a very long time. So long, in fact, that she blushed and looked away, unable to hack it.

His hand went back to her waist, and he inched a little closer, eyes sweeping up and down her front, “Want some breakfast?” he asked quietly with a knowing grin.

She didn't know if she should be embarrassed that he was giving her an out or relieved by it. With a bashful, breathy laugh she slipped out of the bed, “Yeah, breakfast sounds good.”

She had a smoke at his kitchen table, her dog sprawled on his still-out couch bed, staring at her accusingly like he couldn't believe she didn't have one of these things in their house. He kept doing these yippy little dog yawns and rolling onto his back with his legs up and tongue lolling out blissfully like, *hey mom look how cool this living room bed is ! Can we get one?*

Hop fried some eggs and tossed amused looks at the dog, who, when the eggs were finished, got a little bowl of his own and a scratch behind the ears. Joyce thanked him when her plate was put in front of her. He took the seat beside hers and dug in, and Joyce felt like she was married on some TV show where things worked out and there was more laughter than pain. But she wasn't fooled by the illusion of safety his home had wrapped around her. Real monsters crawled through Hawkins. She worried about her boys.

"You doin' okay?" Hop asked as he chewed, shooting a frown her way. She'd just poked at her eggs, lost in thought.

"How do we just forget what happened, Jim? Knowing what's out there. Right here. Right next to us. But unseen--" she lifted a trembling hand to draw on her cigarette.

His fork clanked to his plate, and he scooted his chair nearer to her, "Joyce, listen to me." His hand settled on hers where she idly held her fork and its weight pulled her out of the oncoming panic attack. She met his gaze as he said, "I will not. Let. *Anything* . Hurt you. Or your boys."

"You can't promise that!"

He gripped the back of her chair and jerked it around a little to face him, simultaneously sliding out of his chair and onto his knees on the kitchen linoleum in front of her chair. His hands went to grip her hips, "Christ, Joyce, I can and I am *promising you* that I--" his voice wavered, "I will protect you! I will go *as far as I have to go* to keep you and Will and Jonathan safe. Understand?"

She gulped, and ashes from her forgotten cigarette fell from her trembling hand to the eggs like tasteless pepper. He pulled her forward in her seat, parting her legs around the barrel of his chest,

tilting his face up to hers for a kiss.

Dropping her cigarette into the eggs, she held him under the ears and kissed him back hungrily. He pulled her from the chair into his lap, and she kissed him until she was making love to him, right there in the kitchen floor. He fisted her hair. She bit his lip. He growled, and she giggled. She was rusty; he showed off. They finished together with a sheen of sweat on their skin under their clothes.

Afterwards she stayed in his lap with her arms around his neck, noses brushing as they talked softly. His eyes were wet, and he stroked the back of his fingers along her cheekbone.

“Ever feel blessed?” he whispered. She felt rocked to her core, unprepared for that look in Jim’s eyes and unable to think of anything to say.

After cleaning up, they shared a smoke on the deck, leaning on the railing under the same heavy blanket. She could feel his chest swell with each breath. His body heat kept the late November chill well at bay. Here, like this, there were no monsters to fear.

They smoked and watched the snowflakes melt on the surface of the lake while listening to the news coverage of the state police scandal. Jim flirted in between puffs and kisses and Joyce felt like a teenager again.

The dog dug around through the snow, rolled in it until he got nice and muddy and dripping and then shook out all over Joyce, who decided she had put off a shower long enough.

The shampoo smelled like Jim and when she asked if she could borrow a razor he told her through the door which drawer in the counter to find the disposable ones. She could hear the cocky smile in his voice and wanted to tell him she wasn't shaving for him but that would be a lie.

When she got out, they squeezed in a quickie right there on the bathroom counter before the bus ran. He thrust into her fast and hard while she rolled her head back on the mirror and accidentally left red lines down his arms from her nails, lines which he insisted were

worth it.

They had dressed and made it to the kitchen, lips repeatedly glancing off one another, when they heard the loud rumbling engine at the end of the lane, and a few moments later, the boys jogged up the front steps.

Will opened the door but Jonathan caught it, saying in a voice not meant to carry, “Whoa, *knock* first!”

“Why?”

“Because, they might be...” the teenager trailed off when his eye saw them through the door window sitting at the table fully clothed. He sighed-- *disappointed* ?--and let Will barge in after all.

“Hey!” Joyce said, getting a hug from both of them at once. “Have any trouble on the bus?”

“It was okay,” Will promised. He in particular always got picked on when trapped three to a seat with kids who believed in kooties and called him names.

“How was your first day back?” Jim asked and Will launched into details about everyone's curiosity vaulting him to new heights of popularity. Joyce chuckled and kissed his sweaty forehead asking about his cough. Will shrugged it off and she sighed. Jonathan had inadvertently taught Will not to bother her about stuff. She so very much wanted to be bothered.

After dinner, Jonathan announced that he was going to hang out with Nancy Wheeler. Will, coughing, sat with the dog on the couch bed and did his homework before A TEAM came on. Joyce and Jim stayed at the table, discussing her work schedule and arranging for the Byers to stay here indefinitely, but only because of Jim's insistence and Will begging her to let them.

Finished with her last smoke of the day, Joyce crawled onto the couch bed and snuggled with Will as the kid watched tv. After his shower, Jim slid in behind her and let the dog lay his head in his lap. Joyce felt warm and whole at the idea of the image they made: a

family.

Will fell asleep. Joyce channel surfed with the bulky five button remote control, eyeing the clock as she willed Jonathan home. The minutes had crawled past ten at night when suddenly Jim sat up from his recline in the pillows, alert.

Heart plunging into her gut, Joyce choked, “Wha--?”

“Shhhh!” Jim’s hand closed on her shoulder, and she noted that his attention was locked--not on the dark corners or any moving walls--but on the sound asleep Will. Jim took the remote and muted the sound.

She noticed, then, that Will was pale and sweaty and his breath was rattly and ragged. Jim spoke lowly, “Hear that? How long has he sounded like that?”

“H-he’s always been chesty in the winter,” Joyce answered, feeling his forehead for the tenth time that evening. It was clammy rather than feverish. “He’s had that cough since he’s been back. I’ve been taking his temperature every day, and he practically drinks cough syrup but the doctors say his lungs are “still adjusting from their ordeal” and that there’s nothing to do but wait it out.”

Jim watched Will sleep, with a grim slant to his mouth, “I don’t like it. Those scientists said the air in the Upside Down was, was *toxic* . What if it--I don’t know--gave him something they don’t know to look for?”

Heart clenching painfully at the thought, she brushed Will’s hair from his forehead. “God, I hope not,” she rasped.

Wrapping an arm around her, Jim kissed her cheek, “I didn’t mean to worry you more. It’s just--Sara’s doctor dismissed her first episode as asthma. Could have caught it six months earlier than they did. Hard to trust ‘em after something like that.”

Joyce stroked his face, “Jonathan found a specialist and we took him straight there from the hospital. He ran everything he could think of. Said Will’s lungs are just exhausted and the cold doesn’t help.”

“Shouldn't he have an oxygen tank or something?”

“Insurance won't pay without a diagnosis and--” she blushed with shame and humiliation, “I can't afford to get him one.”

Jim breathed sharply through his nose, “I'll get it. First thing in the morning.”

“Jim, no. You don't--”

“Joyce,” he cut in and his voice was hard, “I'm *taking care of it* . Okay?”

“You're already doing so much for us,” she whispered. He pulled her legs over across his lap and looped his arms around her, mouth to her hair over her ear.

“Let me take care of you,” he whispered, giving her a squeeze. She closed her eyes, trying to trust him but trust wouldn't come to her so easily after sixteen years of Lonnie Byers. More than anything she wanted to trust Jim Hopper, she just didn't know how.

Didn't it mean she shouldn't feel indebted to him? Shouldn't she be able to accept that all he had done wasn't a down payment on anything? Shouldn't she feel like she owed him nothing? On the contrary she knew in her heart she owed him everything. Not knowing what else to do, she cried. Jim held her and stroked her hair.

When she had her cry out, she was embarrassed by it, but Jim made nothing of it. She had just changed into one of his pajamas shirts when Will started to cough and didn't seem able to stop.

She sat stroking his back as he coughed until he choked and gagged up a kind of green phlegm. She hoped that would be enough to ease his congestion, but he continued to cough, and cough and cough until he couldn't breathe.

Hop lost his patience, threw on his Chief's coat and picked Will up out of her arms, racing out to the Jeep in just pajama bottoms and untied boots. Joyce followed, too, cramming her legs into some jeans and not bothering to replace Hopper's pajama tops before putting on

her leather coat. Jim drove through the night with his sirens on, straight to the ER.

When a still-choking Will was taken away and they were left in the waiting room, they got knowing looks from the hospital staff. Joyce realized how it looked wearing two pieces of the same set of pajamas and knew the rumors would be all over town by morning but just then--with her baby coughing up so much phlegm and choking on it--she could not care less what it looked like.

Covering her eyes, she attempted to calm herself down. Jim's hands settled on her shoulders, massaging them gently.

"Should have left a note," Joyce worried aloud when she thought about her other son coming back to Hopper's empty trailer.

"If they keep us here too long, we call and let him know what's happened."

After a half hour of chewing her nails and wishing she'd put on a bra before she left Jim's place, Joyce went to find a payphone where she tried Hopper's home phone. It rang and rang. She hung up with a frustrated scoff, noting it was half past eleven. *Jonathan what the hell are you doing ?*

On the way back, she stopped just around the corner from the waiting room to watch because a nurse had cried, "Jim! Wow! I've been waiting for you to call me back after the other night! Started thinking you had let yourself freeze to death on that deck after all!"

Feeling like she'd been punched in the gut, what tentative trust she had so far extended him broke. Just like that, Joyce didn't know anymore what she was doing with Jim Hopper. Maybe he was just fooling around with her like all those other women. Maybe in a week or two he would have someone else.

Around the corner, Jim was laughing nervously, "Yeah, well, Mary, I uh... I've been so busy with everything that's been happening..."

"I know!" Mary cooed brightly, "You're a big time hero now!"

"Well...."

Awkward silence. Joyce frowned as she waited. Jim cleared his throat, "I'm waiting on word about Will Byers. I brought him in half hour ago. He was coughing bad and couldn't breath. Got his mom and me real worried..."

Joyce winced-- *Oh, Jim, there are better ways !--* as Mary the Nurse said in a tone significantly flatter than before, "Oh. Okay. Well, I'll go see what I can find out."

Mary nearly crashed into Joyce as she rounded the corner. Joyce yelped and grabbed her heart. The younger woman apologized, but then seemed to recognize her. Eyeing the pajama shirt under Joyce's coat, Mary smiled tightly and went on her way.

Returning to the waiting room with a hot face, Joyce avoided eye contact with Jim. She sat and fiddled with the hole in her jeans. Jim paced for a bit but then sat beside her. She turned it all over in her head. *Waiting for you to call me after the other night... the other night...* But he had brushed her off so maybe that meant he was getting serious...

But for all she knew he had been just this serious with Mary *the other night* . What if he was permanently prone to shifting his attention from woman to woman? What if he only wanted her because through her and Will he got to play things out differently than what happened with Sara?

What if--God forbid--what if the toxic air had really given Will some kind of new cancer? Jim couldn't stay and go through all that *again* ; not when he wouldn't *have* to.

A tear slipped from her eye. She tried to dab it away before it was noticed, but Jim put his arm around her, "He'll be okay, honey."

She shoved his arm away. Had he called Mary *honey*, too? A part of her knew the jealousy was irrational, but the insecurities were real enough.

"Joyce?"

She stood, crossed her arms tightly across her unsupported chest and

marched away. With a burp of the chair legs on the waxed floor, Jim launched after her, “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Whirling to face him she sniffed, “He might not be okay, Jim! You said it yourself, they might not know what to look for! What then? Are you really going to stick around while he slowly dies, and go through all of that *again* ?” her voice broke with her heart.

He looked stricken. She wiped angrily at her face, “You want to take care of us, but can you? Honesty, Hop, you’ve been through so much already. So right now, before we know if it’s anything or not, tell me *right no w* if you’ll stay no matter how bad it gets, because if you can’t--”

He caught her shoulders, “I’ll stay, Joyce.”

She pulled from his grip and walked to the far side of the empty waiting room. He scoffed, “Can’t you trust me yet?”

She pressed on her eyes, lost and afraid. Sobs jumped out of her. She had done so much on her own, but if Will was sick, really sick, she wasn’t sure she could go on alone. She thought she might die with him.

Joyce felt Jim approach her slowly and his warm palm settled gently on her shoulder. He said nothing. She did nothing to acknowledge him.

The doctor arrived, then, brisk and professional, to say that Will had a chest cold compounded by lungs already weakened by the recent pneumonia he’d gotten from his ordeal and which he had barely recovered from. Joyce breathed out a sigh of relief.

Hop thanked the doctor and made arrangements for an oxygen tank, which he was given only after he insisted that Will should have one and vowed to pay full price.

Joyce could tell that Jim was embarrassed for blowing it all out of proportion, but she understood his sensitivity regarding a child’s ability to breathe.

After stopping by the hospital pharmacy to fill the mucus reducer

that had been prescribed, they loaded Will back in the Jeep and returned to Hop's place to find Jonathan's car in the driveway. Checking her watch, Joyce found it was after midnight. Her eldest son met them at the Jeep as they unloaded Will with his oxygen tank.

"What happened?" Jonathan asked, pale as a ghost. "I got back and no one was here! I was so worried!" His eye landed on the tube running under Will's nose and he asked, "Buddy, you okay? What happened?"

Joyce explained what happened as they got in out of the cold, noting as she passed her son's car that the engine was popping in the cold night air. When she got to the part about the diagnosis being just a common cold, Jonathan frowned, "I thought insurance wouldn't pay for oxygen without a more serious reason." He was helping clear a side table for the oxygen tank so Will could sleep with the tube on.

"Well, they didn't," Joyce confessed, throwing a shy look at Jim. "Hop is helping us with it."

The smile that broke across the teenager's worried face was like sunshine. Without a moment of hesitation, he threw his arms around the chief. "Thank you."

With a surprised chuckle and an awkward pat on Jonathan's back, Jim humbly brushed away his role in it all. Jonathan released him, blushing now, and returned to his brother's side, ruffling the kid's hair. From there, he seemed to notice for the first time the matching pattern of the flannel shirt Joyce wore and the soft elastic waist pants Hopper was in. His eyes cut back and forth from them before he met her eye with a smirk.

Joyce crossed her arms, deciding now was as good a time as any to get down to brass tacks. "I could hear your car cooling off. You only *just* now got home, didn't you? It's midnight, Jonathan, does Nancy not have a clock?"

"She does," Jonathan confessed guiltily.

"Well what? Do you think I can't tell time?"

"Sorry, mom, really," Jonathan said and explained that he and Nancy had lost track of the late hour while theorizing.

"Is that what kids are calling it these days?" Hop teased. Jonathan blushed again and denied everything, vowing it really had been work. Sitting with them at the table, he drew a little map of Hawkins.

A big dark gash inside the Hawkins lab perimeter represented the gate and little X's marked other places where the demogorgon --Joyce frowned, "So is that what we're calling it?--had come through. The woods. The wall. The shed. The school. It was all within a mile or something. And the Chief's trailer was all the way across town from the problem. Jonathan noted their current positions with a smiley face, "Which I think is a part of why it feels so safe here."

Only a part of it? Joyce and Jim traded a look and Jim gratefully gripped Jonathan's shoulder as the kid continued, "Our working theory is that the tear weakened the fabric of our reality but only within a mile radius of the gate. Each of these little portals healed themselves right back up but the problem is that so long as the main gate is still there, new portals can be easily made anywhere within the radius.

"Chief, you described the gate as growing back closed around whatever went through so we think even it is trying to heal, but like when you pick at a scab, it can't. It will take longer than the others because it is a deeper and more critical wound but given time it *should* close up like all the others, which in turn will make the smaller gates impossible to open so easily. Which means that someday home will be just home again."

Joyce sighed with relief. That had been *exactly* what she needed to hear; there was an end in sight. She kissed Jonathan's cheek. Jim shook his shoulder. " *Good work* but next time call so your mom and me won't have to worry, got it?"

Grinning, Jonathan kept his head down, "Yes, sir."

Will fell asleep fast and while Jonathan was in the shower, Jim and Joyce went to bed. Jim shut the bedroom door this time, and Joyce let him, but rolled on her side when he got in the bed with her.

"Mary seems nice," she said into the quiet.

Jim sighed. "She just passed the time."

"Is that what I'm doing?"

"No!" Jim went to an elbow, shifting the mattress as he did, and gripped her shoulder, "What do you need from me, Joyce? What can I do to help you trust me?"

Feeling foolish, she lifted her shoulder, "Well if I knew I'd tell you, so..."

"Look, I'm aware my track record hasn't been great. After Sara I was--you saw how I was. Cut off from everything. Nothing mattered. For a long time, I was lost. Now... everything has changed. Joyce, I owe it to you. I'm *alive* again and it's because of you, don't you get that means I owe you more than I'll ever--"

"You don't owe *me*!" she cut in, sitting and turning to face him, "You--you saved Will!"

He smiled, a slow spread of light across his face. He sat up and kissed her. "How about instead of arguing who owes who we just make love?"

Body flashing hot, she let him scoop her into his lap but then she resisted a little, protesting, "Wait, Jim. The boys are in the living room!"

"We'll have to be quiet then," Jim whispered bumping his bearded kisses down her jaw. "Jon will turn up the tv when he catches on."

Joyce scoffed and rolled her eyes, "That's inappropriate, don't you think?"

"It's not going to offend him, Joyce. Sixteen year old boys who have their own cars aren't out til midnight with the Nancy Wheeler's of the world doing science experiments and *theorizing*, okay?"

"He said that's what he was doing and I believe him. He's a good kid. He wouldn't just *lie*."

Tucking hair behind her ear, he accepted this, "Well, he *omitted* then, because it wasn't *all* he was doing. Even good kids have hormones."

"Just because you were a player in high school doesn't mean all boys are."

Jim's smile fell, and he held her closer, "Whoever I was then, whoever I was last week--I'm different now. I'll prove it to you. I've got nothing but time to love you *right* ." He kissed her, "And take care of you," kissed her again, "In every way..." he kissed her deeply, "Joyce, let me do that. Okay?"

There was a tremor in him and a desperation in his soft eyes. She might regret it--life so far had her certain of only that--but she nodded, and kissed him back, and let him lay her down, moving into his touches, helping get clothes out of the way.

When the mattress springs whined one to many times, the TV volume increased considerably and, raising his eyebrows, Jim gave her a smug look, which she squished between her hands until he laughed. Playful, they frolicked until Joyce sat on top, stifling laughter. The way it raced her heart reminded her that panic and fear weren't the only things that could shorten breath. Safety had its own thrilling moments.

She rode gently, without a sound from her lips or the old bed. Jim kept rumbling and whispering to her so that she knew just where he was in it all--right there with her: climbing--burning--swelling--drowning--choking, dying. Crying.

He buried his nose in her hair as the final trembles shook them. In an attempt to stay silent, she'd nearly drew blood from her lip. Her teeth peeled away painfully, but the way he sucked on it soothed it instantly.

They slept through the night again with no nightmares jarring anyone awake. Even Jonathan slept soundly enough to snore. Joyce woke with Jim's alarm and learned that it had snowed enough to cancel school and Donald always ran the store alone on snow days which meant she had yet another day off.

Leaning on the corner at the end of the hallway, she looked at her boys sleeping side by side in the TV light. With a floorboard creak, Jim came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“Good?”

She leaned into him. “Good.”